

Report of the ARSC - IASA conference 2001 on " Why Collect? "

ARSC - IASA conference 2001 on " Why Collect? " - "The purpose of Audiovisual Archives" was held at London, during September 23-27, 2001. The National Sound Archives hosted this conference at the British Library Conference Centre. The Association for Recorded Sound Collections (ARSC), founded in 1966 is a non-profit organization dedicated to research, study, publication, and information exchange surrounding all aspects of recordings and recorded sound. With over one thousand members from twenty-three countries, the organization is comprehensive in scope and reflects the interests and concerns of its members, including collectors, librarians and recording engineers.

The International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA) was established in 1969. It supports the professional exchange of information and fosters international cooperation between audiovisual archives in all fields, especially in the areas of acquisitions and exchange, documentation, access and exploitation, copyright, conservation and preservation. IASA has about three hundred members drawn from institutions in almost fifty countries.

Both ARSC and IASA conferences and meetings are held annually in North America. However it was decided to hold 2001 conference in Europe to enable participants to meet at a central place. British Library premises in London was the most ideal and appropriate venue. National Sound Archive (NSA) is one of the largest sound archives in the world. Opened in 1955 as the British Institute of Recorded Sound, it became part of the British Library in 1983. The NSA holds over a million discs, 185,000 tapes and many other sound and video recordings covering the entire range of recorded sound from music, drama, and literature, to oral history and wildlife sounds. The British Phonographic Industry LTD (BPI), Cube Technologies GMBH (CUBE-TEC), UNESCO, The Cutting Corporation and Naxos Historical sponsored the conference.

Over 250 delegates from all over the world attended the conference, mostly from USA and UK. Although some delegates from Canada, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Greece, Hungary, Iceland etc. represented small countries from Northern hemisphere, the attendance from Southern part of the Globe was very poor. Handful of delegates from Ghana, Kenya, Mozambique, Namibia, China and Australia attended. There was no one from Japan except the company exhibiting Laser turntables. From India, I represented 'Society of Indian Recorded Collectors' and Shubha Choudhury from 'American Institute of Indian Studies', New Delhi attended the conference.

Four-day program was full with interesting talks, illustrated lecture demonstrations and exhibitions. Due to parallel and overlapping sessions delegates found it difficult to make choice. Lively discussions and debates followed the presentations. Although several archivists from institutions presented their work very well, several individuals / collectors dominated the conference with their lone efforts and great work.

Title of one of the session was - 'It's my collection and I am proud of it' - and was conducted in two parts. Lectures in these sessions replied appropriately - 'Why Collect?' - the theme question of the conference. Although several private collectors have contributed a lot to the

knowledge of the records and recordings, the concept / profession of discography is not yet respected by society and academia at large. Many speakers mentioned / hinted at this in their talks and hoped that the situation may improve in future.

Nicole Blain of Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) talked on 'The Clyde Gilmour Archive at the CBC music library'. Mr. Clyde Gilmour (1912-1997) was a multifaceted personality and important record collector from Canada. Due to his passion, knowledge and art of presentation, he was invited to present weekly one hour program on Canadian radio. His first program was broadcast on 5th October 1956 and it received wide popularity and vast fan mail. Soon this program titled 'Gilmour's Albums' became the most popular one. He presented nearly 2000 programs in 40 years. Soon after his death, CBC acquired his entire collection consisting of over 14,000 recordings, 2000 radio scripts and other documents. This talk explained why a broadcast library would be interested in acquiring private collection, how this collection crossed the lines between library, archive and museum and what the plans are for future. While listening to this talk I recollected my recent interview with Mr. Ameen Sayani (of famous radio program-'Binaca Geet Mala') at his residence in Mumbai and remembered vast collection of gramophone records and steel cupboards full of recorded spools and cassettes. I wondered what would happen to his personal collection?

Dr. Rainer Lotz, senior record collector and an academician from Bonn, Germany presented an illustrated talk on his forthcoming book - "Beyond Recall". During Nazi regime, around 1933, the Reich's Minister of Cultural Affairs, the Gestapo secret police and representatives of the Jewish community agreed to organize a Jewish cultural association named "Juedischer Kulturbund". Membership was restricted to Jews, all activities were subject to censorship and explicit approval. The history of this Jewish Kulturbund is well documented. However, only the recent research has established the fact that members of Kulturbund operated two independent, Jewish-owned record companies, which existed almost up to the beginning of Second World War. The discs were not for sale to the general public in Germany, but export was possible. Over the years the authorities increased repressive legislation. Whereas in the early stages there was no restriction on repertoire, Jews were first prohibited to record material by Aryan composers and eventually forbidden to record anything at all. The repertoire included the entire range from classical to dance music, from Yiddish comedy to folk songs, even an impressive selection of Synagogal music was available up to the time of the 1938 programs. In Berlin, the members of Kulturbund even recorded the sound track for a Zionist propaganda film that was shot on location in Palestine. During 1934-35 period they made recordings which were not issued in Germany but in Palestine-thus pioneering an independent record production long before the independence of the state of Israel.

Painstaking research has established the biographies of the people involved-entrepreneurs, musicians and cantors. It has been possible to reconstruct the movie film that was thought lost. Almost the entire recorded output of the companies has been restored. Many individuals have not survived the holocaust, but their recorded legacy has now been preserved for the posterity and will be available in a boxed set of 11 CDs and one DVD. [This was ceremonially released in Germany in November 2001]

Another researcher Don McLean from UK talked on 'The restoration of recordings of early mechanically scanned television pictures'. He has published a book titled - 'Restoring Baird's Images'. John Logie Baird, Britain's foremost television pioneer, experimented with video recording onto gramophone discs in late 1920's. Though unsuccessful at the time, his experiments resulted in several videodiscs, some 25 years before the video tape recorder

became practical. These videodiscs called 'Phonovision' remained neglected over the decades, considered by experts as unplayable. In the early 1980's Mr. McLean sought out and restored the surviving Phonovision discs using the computer based techniques in an investigation reminiscent of an archaeological dig. He has not only revealed the images on the discs but also uncovered details of how the recordings were made. The phonovision discs have now become recognized as one of Baird's most important legacies. This talk shed light on the achievements of Baird, the development of video recording and the definition and invention of television itself.

Dale G. Monroe-Cook, Ph.D from USA has a passion of collecting "Unusual Cylinder Record Boxes and Cylinders" and has collected lot of material. His friend and colleague Bill presented a wonderful talk on cylinder boxes and cylinders with lots of colorful illustrations projected from the files on their lap top computer. They also had an exhibit in the exhibition hall. Their ambition is to publish a comprehensive book on cylinders worldwide. They were surprised to learn about cylinders in India and especially Hemendra Mohan Bose's pioneering work in Calcutta in the early period of last century. They asked several questions and requested help and support in getting more details for the proposed publication.

During this talk on cylinders I learnt that about 100,000 cylinders exist worldwide and they are safe in the hands of collectors or in museums and archives. The problem faced is that of non-availability of machines to play these cylinder recordings. Various innovative ideas that are used by private enthusiasts were also described during this talk. In fact, a French young man [Henri Chamoux] exhibited one such machine in the exhibition hall of the conference. He has used a digitally servo controlled lathe machine on which cylinders can be mounted. He has used lightweight gramophone pick-up tone arm with diamond/sapphire stylus to play the cylinder. So, exactly like Edison cylinder phonographs, the cylinder record revolves like a job on the lathe machine and the linear motion of the stylus (tool) tracks the grooves picking up the recorded signal. It is then picked up and amplified using conventional electronic techniques. Various different machines are currently under development and dream is to read out these grooves optically. Unfortunately in India, we do not have any collector of cylinders and at least I have not come across any cylinder so far. These were popularly known as 'Churi's or 'Bangdi's due to their shape and size that resembles the ornament Indian women wear in their arms, especially stack of bangles in Northern part. Very few cylinders of Indian music exist in UK and in Europe and again mostly with the private collectors.

In the exhibition, Mr. Sanju Chiba, President ELP Corporation, Japan demonstrated the Laser turntable that could play shellac and microgroove gramophone records using a laser beam. This was a dream for over 60 years and music lovers and record collectors wanted a player that dose not damage recorded grooves. This dream is realized by passions of US and Japanese engineers.

An American graduate student, Robert E. Stoddard, made a theoretical analysis of the feasibility and concluded that the dream could be realized. He proved that the musical information on analog records could be retrieved optically. None of his colleagues, nor his professor, believed that this theoretical analysis could be converted into a practical machine. Upon graduation, in 1983, Mr. Stoddard established Finial Technology Inc. in California and began to develop optical turntable. Several very able engineers including Mr. Robert N. Stark, graduate from California State University joined him and they had skills in laser optics, high-speed servo systems, and analog signal processing and high precision mechanical systems. This was a difficult task but after seven years of efforts and almost 20 million dollars of

investment, they succeeded the basic development. This was possible in USA where such application of cutting edge technologies are respected and supported by private investors. By this time Compact Discs and CD players had already made their appearance and hence no one was interested in the production of this turntable. Final team did not have expertise and finance for mass production and hence they approached major Japanese audio product manufacturing companies, but they had no real interest in preservation of our heritage of music stored on vinyl/shellac discs. At this point they met Mr. Sanju Chiba of ELP who believed that phonographic recording is a culture and should not be allowed to become extinct. With this firm conviction in mind, ELP invited the Stoddard team to investigate the ways to put the Laser Turntable in the market.

The first and foremost requirement was to cut the cost by means of automated production technology. It turned out that due to variety of records produced and their conditions, high quality individually assembled turntables would only serve the purpose and mass production is not feasible due to limited market. After lot of struggle in 1991 first batch turntable was sold to the music division of The National Library of Canada. This was followed by The National Theater of Japan that houses about 20,000 records of all formats. The company claims that over 1000 turntables have been sold in last ten years and mostly to institutions and collectors.

President Chiba demonstrated the working of turntable by playing discs of different diameters and speeds. At start up, the turntable scans the disc taking note of the blank spaces between tracks. With this information displayed on front panel, the player can be used with all the facilities that a normal CD player has. Even a cracked 78 was played and the sound was quite all right. The most important advantage is that there is no direct physical contact between record groove and stylus hence this eliminates further damage of the recorded grooves. This helps in preserving old, rare and unique recordings available on discs. At present, the cost varies between 12,000 to 15,000 US dollars [i.e. 5-7 lakh rupees] and is beyond the reach of record collectors in India. However if low cost machines are made, the collectors would love to have these turntables.

The exhibitions and poster sessions were visited and appreciated by the delegates. Some of the topics of the exhibits were – collecting and reissuing music hall cylinders on CD-R, 78 rpm era record sleeve project, collecting the unwritten history of railways, The Collections of National Sound archive, Sound documents from the Vienna Phonogrammarchiv (1899-1950). Some private companies undertaking the jobs of transferring entire collections onto new formats also displayed their schemes. Poster of SIRC [Society of Indian Record Collectors] was also put up highlighting the activities through record labels, video screening and slide show. Several delegates visited and remarked that they have seen such colorful Indian labels for the first time.

On the second day of the conference, professional visits at four places were organized - BBC Sound Archive Preservation Project, The audio collections of the Imperial War Museum, The EMI Sound Archive and BBC Sound Archives at Broadcasting House. Although all the four were worth visiting, delegates had to choose one. So, like most record collectors, I joined the group visiting the EMI Sound archive at Hayes. We spent over four hours and had a glimpse of the enormous archival material stored meticulously. Ruth Edge, one of the chief persons behind these archival efforts showed us many sections including the library. She asked me about our society and I was very happy to see 'The Record News' volumes in the library and learnt that researchers do read and refer to this journal.

EMI archives, although dates back to the late 1890's, was relocated to state of the art, purpose built premises in Dawley Road, Hayes, London five years ago (in 1996). It consists of buildings covering the area of 37,000 square feet and boasts 12 miles of shelving. All areas are temperatures and humidity controlled and protected from fire by a highly sophisticated system which when activated, releases a non-harmful gas called Inergen. The Archive houses EMI's Central Research Labs papers and reports; over 7 million historical music related documents, a quarter of million of photographs, half a million of discs dating back to 1897, 450,000 master tapes, 100,000 video masters and rushes, 74,000 metal masters of 78 rpm records, a collection of radios, gramophones, televisions and other trade mark ephemera and a collection of gold and silver discs. In addition to services and support provided on daily basis to EMI Recorded Music, the Archive allows access to visiting researchers and third parties bona fide projects. Delegates were very much pleased with this visit.

A special joint meeting hosted by ARSC and the City of London Phonograph and Gramophone Society (CLPGS, founded in 1919) was held in the evening of the third day of the conference. Members, office bearers of London chapter and conference delegates attended this session. Mr. John Cowley presented a wonderful listening session titled – 'The Dollar and the Pound – West Indian calypsos from a British perspective in the 1950's. About 20 songs from old 78's transferred/burnt on a CD were played. John had circulated written text of each song to the members of the audience and made appropriate comments before and after the song. While listening to these records I could compare some of the tunes with those of the hit songs from Indian Hindi Film of golden period era i.e. 1945-70.

After this session, I was asked to talk about Society of Indian Record Collectors for about 30 minutes. I explained in details about SIRC and its activities, beginning with Mr. Michael Kinnear from Australia who introduced and initiated me in this wonderful world of academic and research work related with gramophone records. I also spoke about the Society's journal and was quite thrilled to see Mr. Frank Andrews and Dr. Rainer Lotz from the audience listening to my talk. Both Dr. Lotz and Mr. Andrews have encouraged our small efforts of SIRC in India and have contributed to our magazine by sending their valuable comments, letters and articles. Soon after the Beka story was published in our magazine, there was an interesting correspondence between Mr. Michael Kinnear, Mr. Frank Andrews and Dr. Rainer Lotz and this was published in one of our issues. Many persons and record collectors told me later that they never knew that India was the sole source for lac that is needed for making the shellac for 78 rpm records and that Indian record labels are so colorful.

In this conference, winners of the ARSC-2001 awards for Excellence were announced at the banquet. My article 'Centenary of Indian gramophone records' [published in TRN-2000] was nominated and entered in the final list in the category of 'Best research in the General History of Recorded Sound'. Although it was not selected for the award, it has caught attention of the delegates and members of ARSC/IASA.

This conference gave me a very good exposure to the archival efforts worldwide and also provided me an opportunity to visit British Library and spend few days in the premises. I could also meet several record collectors and academicians whom I knew through their work, books and the correspondence only. I also realized how much needs to be done back at home without the support of any Govt. agency, private institution and the Gramophone company.

Suresh Chandvankar, Hon. Secretary, 'Society of Indian Record Collectors', Mumbai